

Character Trait Vocabulary: A Schoolwide Approach

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making sufficient progress in reading. By no means should Rule 10 be construed as a recommendation for letter-by-letter sounding of every new word encountered, because it is always more efficient to use the largest known units. When I said, "All of the letters have a job to do," I conveyed to novice and struggling readers the principle that they couldn't use a selective subset of letters to work out unknown words.

## Final words

It may seem surprising that these rules need to be explained. Of course one reads left to right! Of course the order of the letters within a word matters! Of course, what you read should make sense! However, many children do not draw the correct conclusions about these matters by themselves. If allowed to go uncorrected, these misconceptions will lead to some pretty strange (and ineffective) ways of reading. Imagine reading along and *not* going back to check when something doesn't make sense. How could you comprehend what you read? Imagine not knowing that the order of letters mat-

ters! The reading development of a child who does not grasp and operate by all of the rules will necessarily be stunted. It is critical to determine if students understand these bedrock principles, or rules, that we teachers so often take for granted. When they do not, you must find some way—it doesn't have to be rules, but some way that works for you and your students—of conveying these critical principles about print and the reading process to the beginning and struggling readers who need them.

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## Character trait vocabulary:

## A schoolwide approach

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Contemporary research has documented large differences in young students' vocabulary knowledge. By the end of second grade, the gap between students in the top and bottom vocabulary quartiles is approximately 4,000 root words (Biemiller, 2004). In light of the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997), this gap is particularly worrisome and points to the critical need for schools to implement consistent, well-articulated vocabulary instruction across the grades. Recently, I have worked with several Wyoming elementary schools to identify effective vocabulary

instruction strategies and then to tease out how they might be implemented at the school level. Here, I describe the schoolwide approach that I devised for an activity known as character trait vocabulary. My purpose in doing so is two-fold. First, I want to share what has proven to be a very effective practical strategy for coordinated vocabulary instruction that could easily be added to any existing reading program. Second, I hope to inspire literacy educators to similarly flesh out the schoolwide potential of other robust vocabulary instruction strategies.

I first encountered the strategy of character trait vocabulary as a teacher of a bilingual class in the early 1990s. After each story that we read as a

**TABLE 1**  
**Grade-level character trait vocabulary chart**

Kindergarten	brave, careful, cheerful, clever, confident, considerate, curious, dishonest, foolish, gloomy, grumpy, honest, intelligent, impatient, irresponsible, patient, reliable, selfish, ungrateful, wicked
First	arrogant, calm, cautious, considerate, cowardly, courageous, cruel, dependable, fearless, ferocious, gullible, humble, inconsiderate, loyal, mischievous, miserable, optimistic, pessimistic, undependable, wise
Second	argumentative, bold, careless, conceited, envious, faithful, independent, insensitive, irritable, modest, predictable, self-assured, sensible, stern, sympathetic, stern, supportive, timid, unpredictable, unreliable
Third	admirable, appreciative, carefree, demanding, indecisive, egotistical, innocent, insensitive, irritable, modest, persistent, prudent, rambunctious, rash, sensitive, spiteful, sympathetic, tolerant, trustworthy, unsympathetic
Fourth	assertive, cordial, cunning, defiant, fickle, haughty, hesitant, indifferent, meek, menacing, noble, perceptive, pompous, reckless, ruthless, skeptical, submissive, surly, unassuming, uncompromising
Fifth	apprehensive, compliant, corrupt, cross, depraved, dignified, discreet, docile, ethical, frank, glum, ingenious, lackadaisical, malicious, plucky, prudent, rebellious, selfless, sheepish, sullen
Sixth	abrupt, amiable, callous, candid, cantankerous, capricious, confrontational, cynical, devoted, eloquent, erratic, forlorn, gallant, impish, incredulous, pitiless, uncooperative, unflappable, unyielding, whimsical
Secondary	affable, altruistic, angst-ridden, astute, austere, blasé, brooding, buoyant, callous, canny, circumspect, decadent, droll, forceful, fretful, gracious, immoral, imperturbable, ingenuous, insolent, malevolent, merciful, morose, nonchalant, petulant, placid, principled, rakish, roguish, sage, sanguine, self-effacing, sulky, supercilious, unmerciful, urbane

class, I simply asked my students to describe what each of the characters was “really like,” and charted their responses. This brainstorming process prompted the students to analyze the characters and provided me with a rich context in which to teach new terms that fit what the students were saying about the characters. Several years ago, I came across another approach to teaching character trait vocabulary in Janet Allen’s (1999) book *Words, Words, Words*. Allen extended my previous understanding of the strategy. Instead of opportunistically introducing a few terms into the students’ brainstorm, Allen produced a set of words that she would use to describe the characters, discussed the words with the class, and then considered with her students which terms applied to which characters. This use of the strategy helped me to see how my former brainstorming activity could be used more explicitly and systematically to introduce students to key character trait terminology. When I began to work with schools on vocabulary instruction, I recognized that this explicit approach to teaching

character trait vocabulary had great potential as a schoolwide practice.

## Character trait vocabulary chart

To make the character trait activity both powerful and practical for schoolwide use, I generated a list of 20 character trait words for each grade level K–6 and a supplemental secondary word list. To create the list I began with obvious choices like *courageous*, used a thesaurus to identify a number of similar terms, and selected those that I considered to be the most useful for students across the K–12 spectrum. I then tried to put the terms in sequence by level of difficulty and to determine what seemed to be appropriate grade levels for each word. Table 1 presents the result of this process. By creating a list, I do not intend to exclude the use of other relevant terms. Instead, the chart is meant to provide a focus for instruction at each grade level and a sequence across the grades. So, for example,

**FIGURE 1**  
**Character trait chart for *The Paper Bag Princess* (first grade)**

	courageous	clever	ungrateful	gullible	arrogant
Ronald			x		x
Elizabeth	x	x			
Dragon				x	x

a second-grade teacher should feel free to introduce a word from another grade or one that is not on the chart at all if the word is germane to a particular character under discussion. However, over the long run, this teacher also should know that she or he has a special responsibility to present, use, and review the 20 words on the second-grade list. In the end, if teachers at each grade in a K–6 school were to teach their 20 grade-level words effectively, their students might enter seventh grade armed with 120 extremely useful terms for analyzing literary characters, relationships, and themes.

## Instructional sequence

I now describe the basic instructional sequence for the activity of character trait vocabulary. Reviews of effective vocabulary instruction have emphasized the importance of multiple exposures to new words in a variety of contexts and of students' active processing of the new words (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Character trait vocabulary provides an excellent setting for incorporating these key instructional elements. Our approach to the strategy includes the following steps.

1. The activity revolves around the reading of a fictional, historical, or biographical text. The reading can take place as a read-aloud or shared reading with the whole class or within a reading group.
2. At the end of short texts or throughout longer texts, the teacher asks the students to describe the characters' traits, or, in child-friendly terms, "what they are really like inside." The students share their thinking and the teacher lists the terms offered for each character and prompts the students to ex-

plain their responses. This step in the activity prompts students to think analytically about the characters and, as the year progresses, provides them with the opportunity to use the special character trait vocabulary that the teacher has previously introduced.

3. In and of itself, the brainstorming involved in step two does not necessarily add new terms to students' vocabularies. Therefore, after the students have analyzed the characters, the teacher displays a grid with a set of new terms chosen specifically for the characters under discussion. In a schoolwide approach to the practice, the teacher consciously tries to incorporate terms from her or his grade-level list, but she or he should also feel free to use other relevant words. Figure 1 presents a grid that I have used with first graders for Robert Munsch's (1980) *The Paper Bag Princess*. The teacher introduces a word at a time, providing a brief child-friendly definition and example, and asks the students to consider whether the term would apply to each of the characters (e.g., "Do you think Ronald was courageous?"). If a student responds affirmatively, then the teacher asks for an explanation of why the term applies. The teacher then repeats this same process with each of the new words, putting checks on the grid when the students decide that a term fits a particular character. This simple process creates a rich context for children to think through the meanings of the words and to consider when and why they are or are not applicable.
4. In addition to working through this story-specific grid, the class also tracks their use of the grade-level terms across stories. This involves a large chart such as the one in

FIGURE 2

Comprehensive chart for first-grade character trait vocabulary

arrogant	calm	cautious	considerate	cowardly
Ronald				
Dragon				

Figure 2 (this is a partial chart; the actual classroom chart would include all 20 words). Story by story, the class records characters that possess the traits identified on the chart, and the teacher prompts students to discuss similarities across characters who are placed in the same trait column. This allows students to review and elaborate on the meanings of the trait words and encourages rich intertextual thinking.

5. The teacher repeats steps 1–4 with each new text, using different combinations of the grade-level terms as relevant for each new set of characters. The goal is for the teacher to use each of their grade-level terms a number of times over the course of the year, thus providing students with multiple exposures to the words.

Although these steps constitute the basic instructional sequence for the activity, numerous other robust strategies could be used to help students gain a deeper understanding of the grade-level character trait vocabulary. For instance, over the course of a year, a teacher may plan to use the well-known “text talk” strategy (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) for each word, thus providing students with further opportunities to think through the meanings and uses of the terms.

In conclusion, I want to return to the two goals for this article that I shared in my introduction. First, I hope that many educators will consider adopting the schoolwide approach to character trait vocabulary that I have shared here. I consider it a quintessential “low investment, high return” practice. It is brief and easy to use; yet, if implemented schoolwide in an elementary setting, it offers students up to 120 rich literary terms and tremendous experience analyzing and comparing characters. Second, I also hope that this brief description might challenge educators and schools to develop and implement other similar schoolwide strategies for vocabulary instruction. I believe that only a schoolwide commitment to vocabulary instruction and the type of well-articulated instructional practice that I have presented here will effectively prepare all students for success in reading comprehension in the later grades.

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